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**Pass the Mic: Teaching with Hip-Hop**

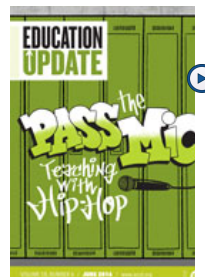
## Pass the Mic: Teaching with Hip-Hop

Sarah McKibben

**Hip-hop culture is woven into every facet of society. We hear it on the radio. We see it on TV; in film, fashion, and art museums; and on buildings and train cars. Hip-hop is youth culture. So why is it not in every classroom?**

When teaching Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Brian Mooney found striking parallels to Kendrick Lamar's Billboard-topping album *To Pimp a Butterfly*. He saw a "pedagogical opportunity" to help his freshmen understand the intersections of racism, beauty standards, and internalized oppression woven throughout both texts.

It made sense: they knew Lamar's music, and Mooney knew Morrison's novel. "To be a culturally engaged teacher means you have to listen to students and value what they're into," he acknowledges.



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## Who Tells Your Story?

Mooney is currently teaching a unit on *Hamilton*—the Broadway musical that uses rap to recount Alexander Hamilton's struggle from a young immigrant to becoming one of America's Founding Fathers. "A lot of teachers are using it to make the *Federalist Papers* relevant," Mooney has noticed, but "I believe the medium through which *Hamilton* is expressed is just as important as the content itself. The fact that it's a hip-hop story, *why is that?*"

Teaching about "hip-hop's origins in 1970s Bronx; the social conditions at the time that gave rise to these brilliant, innovative forms of [despite] limited resources; and how [the culture] has evolved" allows students to connect *Hamilton*'s message to its medium.

For their final project, students at High Tech High School in North Bergen, N.J., most of whom have immigrant backgrounds, will study immigrant populations in Hudson County. Then, they will express their findings through the elements of hip-hop—MCing (rapping), DJing, B-boying (breakdancing), and graffiti art.

Bettina Love, associate professor of educational theory and practice at the University of Georgia, says hip-hop can be a vehicle for learning as early as elementary school. "A lot of young kids come to school deeply rooted in the cultural practices, traditions, and mindsets of hip-hop," Love explains. Hip-hop is a part of their identity—their community of practice—that needs to be acknowledged.

By making cultural connections to hip-hop in school, "kids see that their culture is deeply embedded in academics," Love asserts.

"You don't have to say, 'I can be [into] hip-hop or be smart.' Hip-hop is smart." Love conveys this message at Real Talk, an after-school program she started at the Kindezi School at West Lake in Atlanta, Ga. Real Talk promotes issues of social justice through hip-hop, with an emphasis on the newly accepted fifth element—knowledge of self. It's about "understanding your community, who you are in your community, the history of your community, and how you can make changes in your community."

## White House Meets School House

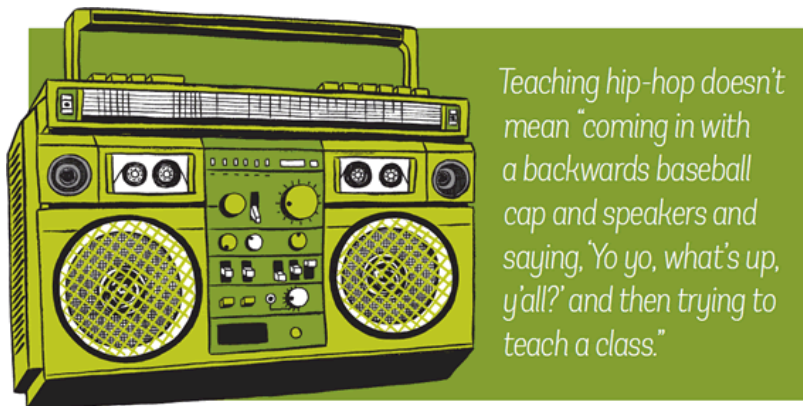
Love and Mooney are among a growing group of educators using hip-hop to make learning more accessible, particularly for urban youth of color. "Even students who don't listen to rap have been shaped by hip-hop culture over the last 40 years," Mooney observes. It "has infiltrated every facet of our society and culture."

"Hip-hop is more than just rap music. It's the way people communicate with each other," adds James Miles, director of Fresh Ed, a program of the Urban Arts Partnership. "When you have President Obama shaking hands and patting someone on the back, that's a hip-hop moment."

hop move that came out of breakdancing."

Fresh Ed uses hip-hop and culturally responsive pedagogy to engage New York City middle schoolers in ELA and social studies. "We work in Title 1 schools in the most segregated school system in the country," says Miles. "Most of the schools are 99 percent black and brown students, and the content they're being served is neither black nor brown."

When a curriculum draws on hip-hop, students "see themselves in class, where they did not see themselves before," Miles explains. "We know students have minds of their own and lived experiences. So we acknowledge those experiences." For example, Fresh Ed teaching artists might ask students, "Have you had trouble in your life? Would you ever want to fight? So do we need the Second Amendment?"



## Culture Decoded

To effectively make these connections, teachers need to be authentic, states Miles. Teaching hip-hop doesn't mean "coming in with a backwards baseball cap and speakers and saying, 'Yo yo, what's up, y'all?' and then trying to teach a class."

But if a teacher says, "I saw this on the news [or] read this in a magazine. How does this connect to Ancient Rome?" then students will get it.

Fresh Ed's standards-based curriculum draws relatable connections to hook students: One lesson compares the rise and fall of Ancient Rome to rapper Iggy Azalea's career. Another explores Western migration in the early United States with a rock-paper-scissors competition and an analysis of the song "Royals" by Lorde.

Teachers can try "one activity at a time to get their feet wet" and eventually craft a whole lesson around hip-hop, Miles notes. Work it in where you can and be willing to take risks.

To remain current, "learn about youth culture, even if that means turning to Google," he advises. Pull out the themes in what you're teaching and connect them to what's trending on Twitter or Instagram. Go to iTunes or Google Play and listen to the top songs.

Teachers may struggle with the offensive language and themes pervasive in rap music, but a song "that's violent toward women, that's homophobic, that's opulent and glorifies money and materialism, actually has a place in the classroom, too," argues Mooney. "If we want students to think more critically, what other avenue do they have for doing that except in a classroom with an educator who is unafraid to ask difficult questions?"

"A huge piece of this work is about literacy in the 21st century," Mooney emphasizes. "It no longer means just being able to decode words on the written page; it means being able to decode the world around you—music, film, blogs, all the elements of media that surround us."

Still, "you don't bring [offensive] lyrics into an *elementary* classroom," counters Love, but you can challenge kids who repeat them. Explain to your students, "That song is hurtful. Why do you think that's not an appropriate thing to say?"

## From Remix to Ignition

In addition to being turned off by the language, teachers often concede, "I'm not from an urban area or I didn't grow up listening to hip hop. I can't teach this," says Lauren Leigh Kelly, an English teacher at Half Hollow Hills High School West in Long Island, N.Y. But as long as your students are connecting to the culture, "let them teach you," she says. "Sometimes the less we know about a topic, [the more it allows for students to become the experts.]"

Kelly uses hip-hop as an introduction to literary analysis in her sophomore English class. "Before we read and analyze a text or a short story [through] different lenses, I'll start with some hip-hop songs," she explains. One group will read a song through a gender lens while

another reads it through a class lens.

Students also participate in the allusion project, in which they analyze two songs, one that references the other. "It could be sampling the beat, [directly] referring to the other song, or taking the chorus and remixing it," Kelly clarifies. For instance, Kanye West's "Stronger" alludes to Daft Punk's "Harder, Better, Faster, Stronger," and Jennifer Lopez's "Jenny from the Block" samples the Beatnuts' "Watch Out Now." Students present the texts to the class and take questions from their peers. Ultimately, they decide, "Did the person build on the song or make it better?"

In a project like this, students are researching and studying language, argument, audience, and purpose "in a way that's more engaging and less distancing," says Kelly. The beauty of hip-hop is that it helps students "reach these skills faster or more effectively."

## It's Tricky

Kelly recently introduced cyphers in her 12th grade hip-hop lit class (students stand in a circle and contribute lines of a poem or a rap one at a time). "It was tricky at first," she admits. "A lot of students were [freestyling] in the cafeteria or at track practice but not in a classroom with a teacher."

She starts the exercise with a prompt like "write one or two lines about school" or "come up with four lines that tell a story." Once students become comfortable in cyphers, "they really want to just spit rhymes and see what happens."

The exercise "unlocks something in writing, too," Kelly has noticed. Rather than asking, "What do I write next?" her students learn that "it's OK to see what comes out."

During Mooney's unit on *Hamilton*, students annotated the musical's opening number and then came together to share two bars to read over a beat in a cypher. They were "experimenting and playing with the language," says Mooney, picking and contributing the lines they deemed most powerful.

"You'll have one student say, 'Immigrants, we get the job done.'" Another might even repeat it. "These lines resonate and bounce off each other," he notes, "opening the door for deeper analysis and discussion."

## Common Ground

As a first-year elementary school teacher in Miami, Love had difficulty connecting with her students, many of whom spoke different languages. But when she came into school one day wearing a pair of Nike Air Force 1 sneakers, they immediately became the topic of conversation. "When I realized what we all had in common was hip-hop, the classroom became totally different," she confirms.

Love started experimenting and allowed students "to just draw all day long, to talk about graffiti, and to [express themselves through] rap."

"Kids started coming to my room after school. In the morning, I'd drive in and find five or six kids waiting for me in the parking lot." That's when she realized, "*This is working.*"

Suddenly, "students were excited to be at school," Love concludes. "They saw themselves as learners." **EU**

### Hip-Hop Set List

#### Books

*Beats, Rhymes, and Classroom Life* by Marc Lamont Hill  
*Breakbeat Pedagogy: Hip-Hop and Spoken Word Beyond the Classroom Walls* by Brian Mooney @BeMoons  
*Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* by Jeff Chang  
*Decoded* by Jay-Z  
*Hip-Hop Poetry and the Classics* and *Hip-Hop Language Arts* by Alan Sitomer and Michael Cirelli  
*Hip-Hop Math* by Alex Kajitani and Alan Sitomer  
*Learn Then Burn: A Modern Poetry Anthology for the Classroom* edited by Tim Stafford and Derrick Brown  
*Performing Identity/Performing Culture: Hip Hop as Text, Pedagogy, and Lived Practice* by Greg Dimitriadis  
*Slam School: Learning Through Conflict in the Hip-Hop and Spoken Word Classroom* by Bronwen Low

#### Other Resources

Cornell Hip Hop Collection  
Fresh Ed, a program of the Urban Arts Partnership  
HipHop Archive & Research Institute at Harvard University  
#HipHopEd Twitter chats; Tuesdays from 9:00 to 10:00 p.m. ET  
Real Talk: Hip Hop Education for Social Justice  
Science Genius by Dr. Chris Emdin  
Science with Tom

Sarah McKibben is the managing editor of *Education Update*.

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